DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 246 606 EC 162 814

AUTHOR Whitmore, Joanne Rand
TITLE The Challenge: To Nurture the Full Development of Potential in All Gifted Students.
PUB DATE Apr 84
NOTE 11p.; A commissioned paper, contained in EC 162 812.
PUB TYPE Guides - Non-Classroom Use (055)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS Delivery Systems; Elementary Secondary Education; *Gifted; *Intervention; *Talent Identification; *Underachievement

ABSTRACT

The paper presents basic information about gifted underachievers (UAGs). Terms such as "potential" and "underachievement" are defined and identification processes considered (parents' and teachers' roles are defined, and typical characteristics of UAGs noted). Causes of underachievement in gifted students are considered, including motivational problems, lack of environmental nurturance of intellectual potential, mild to severe handicaps, developmental delays, poor health, and specific or general academic skill deficits. Five program components successful in reversing underachievement are addressed: the teacher, the curriculum, the instruction, the peer group, and special services. Delivery models (self-contained classrooms, resource rooms, and regular classes with individualized education program support) are described. (CL)

****
* Reproductions supplied by EDRS are the best that can be made *
* from the original document. *
****

U.S. DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION
NATIONAL INSTITUTE OF EDUCATION
EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)
This document has been reproduced as received from the person or organization originating it.
Minor changes have been made to improve reproduction quality.
Points of view or opinions stated in this document do not necessarily represent official NIE position or policy.

ED246606

Commissioned Paper:

The Challenge: To Nurture The Full Development of Potential In All Gifted Students

by

Dr. Joanne Rand Whitmore
Assistant Dean for Teacher Education
Kent State University

"PERMISSION TO REPRODUCE THIS MATERIAL HAS BEEN GRANTED BY
W. Cullar
TO THE EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)."

EC 162814

History will undoubtedly note that the 1980's were marked by critical reviews of American education and a barrage of demands for excellence. Schools are being challenged to provide greater excellence in teaching that will result in higher student achievement. Accompanying a general desire for excellence in our society and its schools has been a growing awareness of the need to do more to challenge and develop the full potential of students with a special talent or gift for learning and creative production.

Gifted education has become a focal point of study and discussion, if not an agenda priority, in many state departments of education and local school systems. I believe that this attention to the needs of intellectually gifted students and efforts to improve their educational programs can provide the stimulus and leadership necessary to accomplish significant improvements in curriculum and instruction for all children. However, the greatest potential gains from attention to gifted education will be lost if schools do not include in the population served those students who have not demonstrated their superior abilities consistently in high academic achievement but have evidenced exceptional potential. The schools I expect to be most successful in their response to demands for excellence and higher student achievement will be those whose educators (a) focus on developing the potential for learning in all students; (b) search continuously for special gifts in all children; and (c) nurture gifted performance in students with high potential as learners.

The purpose of this paper is to provide educational leaders in the state of Florida with basic information about gifted underachievers that will challenge them to seize the opportunity to provide leadership by demonstrating how to identify and develop exceptional academic potential in students with records of average or below average performance. The content of the paper will include sections on (a) definition of the terms; (b) identification of gifted underachievers (UAGs); (c) causes of underachievement that suggest methods of prevention and reversal, and (d) programming options for UAGs.

DEFINING THE TERMS

In this short paper, I will offer concise, simple yet accurate definitions that can facilitate the discovery of UAGs. First, to identify gifted underachievers one must have an accurate conception of giftedness in order to recognize it apart from patterns of high achievement. Since the wording of the 1972 Federal definition of "gifted" included potential as well as demonstrated ability, there has been growing awareness and acceptance of the fact that giftedness is a quality that exists prior to and apart from exceptional accomplishment, especially in children. However, schools generally design G/T programs first for the intellectually gifted or academically talented who are high achievers in the higher elementary grades. A precise definition of "intellectual giftedness" is the possession of exceptional potential as a learner on intellectual or cognitive tasks, which includes underachievers. A child's giftedness may be in one focused area of learning or cognitive processing, or in many areas and mental

processes. Few mentally gifted students have the capability of truly excelling in all subjects and on all kinds of academic tasks.

Underachievement can be simply defined as academic performance that is significantly lower than predicted based on some substantive evidence of learning potential. Test scores and skilled teacher observations most often provide the basis for judging the discrepancy. Although some professionals claim the discrepancy must be precisely measured and its degree of significance statistically tested, it is both practical and reasonable to assume there is a range of mild to severe underachievement and one need not quantify or statistically test the degree of significance to design and provide appropriate educational interventions. Such obstacles to identification generally occur to limit program accessibility to numbers manageable with funds available. All underachievers deserve attention to their needs and appropriate services/programming.

Operationally, a gifted underachiever is one who has evidenced exceptionally high potential for learning and academic achievement but is performing at a lower level, often "average" or below.

IDENTIFYING GIFTED UNDERACHIEVERS

Common practices in the identification of gifted students today involve the use of standardized achievement and aptitude tests, teacher recommendations, and grades. High achieving gifted students are easy to recognize by their academic performance. Underachievers are easy to miss, unless they perform well on standardized tests. Most UAGs do not reveal their exceptional ability on group-administered achievement or aptitude tests; the individually administered Binet or WISC usually provides the initial evidence of their giftedness. UAGs who possess exceptionally high aptitude in specific areas, such as math and science, which are not assessed on the Binet or WISC, often are detected through observation of their advanced problem solving skills and work on special projects. Even the content of standardized achievement tests does not allow students to demonstrate their exceptionally high abilities.

Discovery of the significant numbers of mentally gifted students who have not been recognized and served as "gifted" has occurred over the last two decades because of three changes in practices: (a) increased use of tests and more sophisticated assessment procedures; (b) increased teacher referral of students for special education services because of learning or behavioral problems; and (c) increased effort to develop the potential of culturally different and minority children. It has been in the process of assessing or working with those "disadvantaged" or "problem" children that exceptionally high mental abilities--sometimes quite specific, sometimes general--have been discovered during one-to-one interaction between the teacher/examiner and the pupil. Binet or WISC scores have revealed exceptionally high intelligence in some children referred for LD or BD placement, particularly.

As a result of these discoveries and the sharing of such information, the profession has become sensitized to the fact that it has tended to identify and serve only a segment of the gifted population, the high achievers. Some educators maintain that it is appropriate only to serve those students who excel far beyond the ability of the regular program to accommodate. However, the results of the Cupertino program (Whitmore, 1980) suggest that (a) gifted children who develop severe emotional and behavioral problems early in school and fail to succeed academically are among the most highly gifted and creative, and (b) the provision of appropriate educational programming reverses early patterns of school failure and results in patterns of high motivation and achievement. There is convincing evidence that all young mentally gifted students want to excel in learning, even in school, and that high achievement will result from providing appropriate programming. The potential gains to school systems and society from preventing and reducing underachievement are obvious.

In order to identify intellectual giftedness in students with average or lower performance, in the culturally different, and in the handicapped, all teachers in the system must be sensitively searching for evidence of exceptional potential for learning and achievement. Usually the individual psychological testing necessary for identification does not occur without teacher referral. And, it is possible that a skilled teacher may tap into a child's potential for exceptional achievement in science and math that may not even be evidenced in the results of a test battery. The reported high error of teachers in referrals for gifted programs has been a function of a lack of training and accurate information about giftedness--e.g., that all gifted students excel in many or all areas, are emotionally and socially more mature, are highly motivated to excel in school, and excel early in reading and language arts. These and other myths have created stereotypes that have caused many highly gifted students to be unrecognized. The myths represent overgeneralizations of Terman's research on high achievers by the public and profession.

What characteristics will reveal intellectual giftedness in students who are not high achievers? One must focus on those behaviors that are related to learning, to intellectual/academic performance. Intellectually gifted students can be discriminated from nongifted in terms of characteristics related to their level of cognitive development and the quality of their cognitive processing or thought. A list of discriminating "intelligent behaviors" usually includes: (a) communication--the use of symbolic systems as language; (b) memory for facts and events; (c) the use of acquired knowledge in problem solving and inquiry; (d) skills of reasoning--analytical thinking, synthesizing, inductive and deductive logic; (e) flexibility and fluency of thought--an ability to manipulate symbols and ideas, to transfer information across settings, to generalize from specifics, to perceive relationships; and (f) the creative production of new ideas, images, objects, etc. Gifted children, including underachievers and the handicapped, can be discriminated from nongifted students by the ease and speed with which they acquire those intelligent behaviors and by the quality, as well as quantity, of those behaviors. Except where handicaps or environmental factors inhibit development, gifted

children will be found to be accelerated in their development of those abilities and the quality, complexity, and sophistication of their behavior will be noticeably superior to their agemates.

If one is looking for intellectual giftedness, one must avoid attending to personality traits, social behavior, and emotional adjustment characteristics and focus on cognitive processing: learning and thinking. Traits such as high task commitment, initiative and independence, leadership ability, and self-disciplined behavior are not reliable indicators of giftedness because their development is a function of interaction between the child's personality and needs and the provisions of the environment. Most UAGs are not recognized as gifted by teachers because of their failure to behave "maturely," to appear highly motivated, and to respond positively to teacher direction or influence. Similarly, young gifted children slow in acquiring reading skills or motivation to read are not recognized because of the expectation that all mentally gifted children are quick to learn to read and to become eager readers.

Strategies for identification begin with classroom teachers becoming more skilled in teaching to stimulate and evoke the manifestation of higher abilities in all areas of cognitive processing--e.g., scientific reasoning, creative thinking and production, critical/evaluative thinking, etc. It is obvious that the identification of UAGs depends heavily upon curricula and instructional methods that not only allow but encourage children to reveal their exceptional abilities for thinking, learning, producing. The discovery of UAGs will be impeded by textbook-workbook instructional modes; classrooms without active inquiry and problem solving; and teachers who do not engage students regularly in the sharing of ideas, creative and critical thinking, discussions and debate. In those situations, identification will depend upon two other sources: parents and diagnostic assessments.

Parents can be valuable sources of information that lead to the discovery of giftedness in underachievers. Reports by parents of advanced projects and interests pursued at home are an important indicator. Carefully structured parent questionnaires or interviews to provide teachers with information about the child's out-of-school activities can reveal interests and abilities that provide clues to the child's giftedness. Certainly discrepancies between home and school performance on tasks involving intellectual ability must be seriously explored.

The second source of information beyond teachers that can lead to identification of UAGs has been mentioned earlier, special education assessment procedures. There is a critical need for school psychologists and special educators to become more informed about the nature of intellectual giftedness and about the characteristics of UAGs. Often identification has resulted from the sensitive perception of exceptional intellectual potential in a child during testing by a school psychologist. All school personnel need to be aware of the reliable characteristics of giftedness, the interfering stereotypes that blind us to recognition of giftedness in underachievers, and the

need to continually seek to "tap into" the hidden potential of UAGs by providing opportunities for them to develop and manifest their special abilities (Whitmore, 1982).

CAUSES OF UNDERACHIEVEMENT IN GIFTED STUDENTS

The cumulative records of UAGs and the referral forms for psychological assessment typically are found to describe the UAG student as:

> lazy, doesn't try; assigned work is persistently incomplete, and what is done is often messy and careless; unmotivated and uncooperative; frequently disruptive, aggressive or withdrawn; perpetually "off-task," shows no power of concentration during work periods.

If a child has exceptional potential for learning and has exhibited early in life high levels of curiosity and drives to know, understand, and master knowledge and skills, one wonders why the child is described by the words above. Careful analysis of the individuals in the Cupertino UAG project revealed that the reported patterns of behavior were the children's immature ways of coping with intense psychological conflict in the school experience. Their responses to the Cupertino intervention program demonstrated that none of them wanted to behave in ways leading to academic failure, teacher criticism, and peer ridicule or rejection.

What generated such conflict for these highly gifted children in classrooms? It was the tremendous gap between their levels of mental ability and actual performance, between their self-expectations and their accomplishments, between their personal interests and the content of the curriculum, and between their educational needs and instructional self-concepts and self-esteem, which led to individual patterns of withdrawal to avoid painful disappointment or aggressive behavior to compensate and frantically assert one's worth. More moderately underachieving gifted students tend to comply and conform, working and interacting minimally, thus never revealing the intellectual potential that would lead to higher expectations. In underachievers, the tendencies of gifted children to be perfectionistic, self-critical and demanding, and to be super-sensitive to others produce feelings of intense frustration, fear of failure and rejection, and guilt over unmet expectations.

From another perspective, one might categorize UAGs according to the principal cause of the child's failure to perform at a level closer to his/her ability. Four classifications seem to include all UAGs:

1. Motivational Problems--conflict between the child's personal values, interests, and needs and the school curriculum; or a preoccupation with other concerns, such as family problems or social isolation.

2. Lack of Environmental Nurturance of Intellectual Potential--low SES families that offer little exposure to books, advanced lan-

guage, stimulating development of thinking skills; or culturally different backgrounds that do not value academic achievement, especially for females.

3. Mild to Severe Handicaps, Developmental Delays, Poor Health--low energy or interfering hyperactivity, specific learning disabilities or delayed perceptual-motor skill development; specific brain damage/cerebral dysfunction or neurological impairment; hearing or vision impairment.

4. Specific or General Academic Skill Deficits--difficulty writing or reading; need to master basic facts and skills (math, spelling, letters and sounds); lack of prerequisite learning, e.g., skills of composition.

Regardless of the categorical cause of the individual student's psychological conflict that results in underachievement, the guidelines for programming are the same.

PROGRAMMING OPTIONS

In the past, UAGs have been regarded as emotionally disturbed or possessing psychological or personality problems. The common intervention has been individual counseling, provided usually during adolescence. A more successful approach is that of viewing the problem and need as fundamentally educational matters that can be effectively resolved in the classroom, within the "normal" experience of the child.

There is no one way to meet the needs of UAGs programmatically, but there is only one way to begin. After identification, an analysis must be made of the dynamic interaction between the child's characteristics and needs and the characteristics and demands of the school program. Then, one must design a program, manipulating all available resources, to meet the child's special needs and guide the development of new achievement-motivated behaviors. The program must address three critical needs of UAGs: (a) to grow in understanding themselves, the nature of their giftedness and their "problems"; (b) to learn constructive ways of coping with inevitable conflict and frustration; and (c) to develop a healthier, more realistic self-concept and higher self-esteem derived from realistic expectations and genuine success experiences, socially and academically.

There are five program components that determine success in reversing patterns of underachievement regardless of the program format.

1. The Teacher(s) must accept the fact that the child is mentally gifted, does not want to underachieve or fail, has low self-esteem, and needs to develop constructive coping skills and self-understanding. The teacher(s) must be skilled in guidance techniques, accurate in understanding the nature of giftedness, and positive in emotional response to the challenge of working with the child.

2. The Curriculum must be challenging, personally meaningful and rewarding to the UAG child a high percentage of the time. For the curriculum to be appropriate, it must be balanced between basic skill development and the arts and sciences, infused with career exploration and development of personal interests, and designed for maximum challenge and success.

3. The Instruction must require minimal memorization and drill/practice activity, and provide maximal opportunity for inquiry, scientific investigation, and creative production. Self-directed learning activity should be encouraged and student self-discipline nurtured. The climate created by the instructional style of the teacher should be one of excitement, anticipation, personal satisfaction, and low pressure.

4. The Peer Group of classmates must include at least a few other gifted students, possibly other underachievers, who may become special friends. The group must be accepting of individual differences, diversity.

5. Special Services should be provided as needed--for handicapping conditions or remedial instruction, for gifted education, or for group counseling. In addition, supplementary psychological and medical services often are needed from the community, as may be family counseling.

Some keys to success can be identified. Intervention will be more successful, in less time, the younger the student is. It is extremely advantageous to begin to identify and serve these children in the primary grades. With every year of school, the child's attitudes and behavior patterns become more deeply set. One must expect such change to require substantial time, even in the early grades. The more comprehensive the approach (e.g., self-contained classroom), the more quickly change will occur, and continuity from year to year for the student will ensure lasting effects. Another key to success is the use of an interdisciplinary team of professionals working with the parents for the benefit of the child. A wide range of expertise is often needed to help the child.

Models for delivery of services are few: (a) the self-contained classroom for UAGs, (b) the resource room delivery of special services with regular classroom placement, and (c) an IEP approach with all services provided within the regular program. The self-contained classroom at the primary level has been 100 percent successful; it was not as successful (about 50 percent) at the intermediate level in Cupertino. Because of the relatively few UAGs identified in systems, most services have been delivered through resource room support to regular classrooms. In such cases it is most important that the UAG student be allowed to receive special services for his/her giftedness as well as for a handicap. Often UAGs, especially LD/Gifted, are denied access to any special services because the child's performance is near grade level, the effect of giftedness moderating the handicap. The third model, the Individual Educational Plan, is one in which specialists assist the teacher(s) with modifications in the regular

program, sometimes with the child receiving additional instruction in other classrooms for specific subjects. At the secondary level, most programming is a homeroom or "core" period that provides for the monitoring of student progress, group counseling, and individual work on remedial skill development.

It is my personal and professional belief that the provision of a challenging, rewarding curriculum delivered with the motivating style of instruction appropriate for gifted students will significantly reduce underachieving behavior in gifted students and benefit all children in the classrooms. In one sense, the problem is quite simplistic, based on my experience. However, the major obstacle is the attitude of teachers toward gifted students who do not strive, conform, and acquiesce. . . so we find the most severe underachievers to be those who are most highly gifted and creative.

Reversing patterns of underachievement in gifted students requires mostly commitment, sensitive openness, flexibility, patience, good problem solving skills, and instructional skills for gifted education. Ignoring the problem, or denying the contribution of the school to its development, is counterproductive and results in severe emotional and behavioral problems in many gifted students who could be high academic achievers. In meeting the challenge to nurture the full development of potential in all gifted students, I am confident we can meet the demands for excellence in our schools.

References

Dowdall, C. B., & Colangelo, N. Underachieving gifted students: Review and implications, Gifted Child Quarterly, 1982, 26, 179-184.

Whitmore, J. R. Giftedness, conflict, and underachievement. Boston: Allyn & Bacon 1980.

Whitmore, J. R. Recognizing and developing hidden giftedness, The Elementary School Journal, 1982, 82 (3), 274-283.